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*Title*

Investigating Work-family Policy Aims and Employee Experiences

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### *Abstract*

**Purpose:** This study systematically investigates the extent to which the documented aims of formal work-family policies are being achieved at the level of individual employees. **Method:** Consistency between policy and practice in the case study organization was explored via an analysis of organizational documents which described work-family policies and 20 interviews with employed women with dependent children. **Findings:** Results show the use of flexible work arrangements was consistent with aims related to balance and productivity. However, women's experiences and perceptions of part-time employment conflicted with policies aiming to support the same career opportunities as full-time employees. **Limitations:** The nature of the organization and its policies as well as certain characteristics of the sample may limit the generalizability of findings to other sectors and groups of employees. **Practical Implications:** The research highlights the need to assess whether work-family policies are experienced as intended, a process which may contribute to future policy development and assist human resource specialists to promote genuine balance between work and non-work responsibilities. **Contribution:** The results inform the current understanding of how organizational policy translates into practice.

### *Key Words*

childcare; labor force participation; motherhood; non-maternal care; part-time

### *Classification*

Research paper

### *Introduction*

Organizational work-family policies have been developed to moderate the greater care commitments of employees with family responsibilities, thereby assisting employees to simultaneously fulfill their responsibilities both at work and at home. However, a growing body of literature questions whether the provision of these policies alone, inevitably facilitates the effective blending of work and family. Examples of work-family policies include part-time work, career break schemes, parental leave, flexible hours arrangements and compressed work weeks (Ministerial Task Force on Work and Family, 2002). To date, women with dependent children have been by far the largest demographic group to utilize these arrangements (Charlesworth, 1997), notwithstanding the availability of these options to all workers.

Although detailed and generous formal work-family policies are available in many organizations, little previous research based on systematic policy evaluation data has addressed whether the stated aims of these policies are being achieved. This gap limits the capacity to make statements about policy effectiveness and prevents the systematic implementation of such policies as part of an overall strategic business approach (Russell and Bourke, 1999). This paper empirically addresses whether the documented aims of work-family policies in an Australian University are being achieved, based on the perceptions of a

group of employed mothers ( $N = 20$ ). The paper firstly outlines the impetus for work-family policy development and reviews literature identifying the benefits and limitations of relevant programs. A contemporary snapshot of organizational policy and employment statistics in the Australian tertiary education sector will provide the context within which the research was undertaken. Identifying how policy and practice intersect is a necessary pre-requisite for facilitating the effective blending of work and family responsibilities.

### *Impetus for Work-family Policy Development*

Public and organizational policy development in Australia has had a substantial impact on the interface between work and family in the latter half of the twentieth century. The first formal step in allowing married women access to paid work was the abolition of the marriage bar in the Public Service in 1966 (Young, 1991). Other significant government initiatives that affected women's labor force participation (LFP) were the introduction of permanent part-time employment by The Australian Public Service in 1986 (Young, 1991) and the ratification in 1990 of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) Convention 156; *Workers with Family Responsibilities 1981* (Romeyn, 1992). The major objective of this Convention is to provide employment opportunities, in terms of access and advancement, for employees with family responsibilities, equal to those who have fewer commitments or greater support in their family/personal lives (Russel and Eby, 1993).

The Australian Commonwealth and State Governments have addressed work-family issues through the implementation of a number of employment-related strategies and policies. Some of these issues arise from major economic, social and cultural transformations that have occurred in the last 50 years. These trends include the long-term decline in fertility rates<sup>1</sup> and its impact on population and labor force growth; as well as the strong growth in women's LFP

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<sup>1</sup> The total fertility rate for any year is the number of children the average woman would bear during her lifetime, if she experienced the birth rate of that year (Norris, 1996). Australia's current fertility rate is 1.73 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002).

in the child bearing and rearing age group (15-45 years) and the subsequent impact on demand for formal childcare (Ministerial Task Force on Work and Family, 2002). Legislative reforms, including anti-discrimination, industrial relations and affirmative action law, have also lifted the profile of work and family issues. These reforms have resulted in the mandatory reporting of work and family policies for organizations with greater than 100 employees; the expansion of legal protections to explicitly include those with family responsibilities, 12 months unpaid maternity leave; and the availability of part-time work up to a child's second birthday by agreement with the employer (Ministerial Task Force on Work and Family, 2002; Russell and Bourke, 1999).

Although the social and political environment described in this paper largely focuses on the Australian context, many trends in the work and family arena are consistent with those found in the United States, United Kingdom and Europe. These trends include the increasing numbers of mothers with young children entering the labour market; the increasing casualization of the workforce and associated reductions in bargaining power; the role of trade unions in replacing existing policies by making a legal case for change; and the hesitation by governments to put into place a network of programs supportive of working parents (Haas, Hwang and Russell, 2000).

### *Benefits and Limitations of Work-family Policy*

There is empirical evidence that work-family policies go some way towards achieving their overall aim, that is, to assist employees to simultaneously fulfill their responsibilities both at work and at home. For example, "family responsive" human resource policies have been hailed by advocates of social change as methods for reducing the conflict between working and raising families (Grover and Crooker, 1995; Raabe and Gessner, 1988). The

conflict is thought to be reduced via direct positive effects on employee perceptions of control over work and family matters (Thiede and Ganster, 1995). Increased perceptions of control have also been found to lead to a reduction in personal stressors, indirectly improving the attitude, mental health and physical health of workers (Thomas and Ganster, 1995). The provision of family-friendly work practices also contribute to increase employees' organizational commitment (National Council of Jewish Women, 1993; Russel, 1993), morale (Hogarth, Hasluck and Pierre, 2001; McCampbell, 1996) and job satisfaction (Bedeian, Burke and Moffett, 1988).

Research suggests that the provision of family-friendly work practices may also benefit organizations by improving the retention or recruitment of skilled women (National Council of Jewish Women, 1993; Raabe, 1990; Wolcott, 1991), reducing absenteeism (Russell, 1993; Wolcott, 1993), increasing productivity (Hunt, 1993), reducing hiring and retraining costs (Labich, 1991) and providing for easier recruitment and higher productivity (Hunt, 1993; Russel, 1993). The provision of part-time and flexible scheduling is also pursued by organizations wanting to reduce their turnover costs. For example, Schwartz (1989) contends that a part-time return to work following childbirth enables women to maintain responsibility for critical aspects of their jobs; keeps them in touch with the changes constantly occurring at the workplace and in the job itself; reduces stress and fatigue; and enhances company loyalty. Supporting these results, Solihull and McRae (1994) found that the lack of availability of part-time work influenced mothers' decisions to go to a different employer. Several studies have also found that women with greater flexibility in start and finish hours, work longer into pregnancy and return to work sooner following childbirth (Hofferth, 1996; Melbourne Business School, 1998). The association between flexible work policies and organizational cost benefits has provided the impetus for their introduction in many enterprises (e.g., Dex and Scheibl, 2001).

In contrast to the positive impact many work-family policies may have on employees and organizations alike, several limitations in relation to work-family policy usage have also been identified. These limitations indicate a potential gap between policy intentions, which are stated in exclusively positive terms, versus what occurs in practice. For example, some employees fear there will be an opportunity cost of utilizing work-family provisions because these entitlements are often perceived as ‘fringe benefits’ for which there will be a reciprocal trade-off. Tam (1997) found that part-time workers (both men and women) were more likely to be subordinates rather than supervisors as compared to their full-time counterparts, with those working fewer hours being worse off in terms of promotion prospects and other entitlements, than those who worked more hours per week. Several other studies have also found lower-than-expected numbers of employees taking advantage of part-time work options (e.g., Fried, 1998; Griffin, 2000; Jenner, 1994; Kirby and Krone, 2002; Solomon, 1994). Junor (1998) cites statistics from the Annual Reports of five private banks to the Affirmative Action Agency which show the proportion of female part-time employees categorized as ‘unpromoted’ was 96.7 percent and the results were very similar for male part-time employees. The corresponding figures for unpromoted full-time females and males were 64.9 percent and 26.1 percent respectively. The 1998 Workplace Employee Relations Survey (WERS) in Great Britain also revealed that the usage or take up of family-friendly working arrangements in general, was limited (Dex and Smith, 2002). A further study by Allen and Russell (1999) found that employees who utilized family-friendly policies were perceived by co-workers as having decreased organizational commitment which was thought to subsequently affect the allocation of organizational rewards such as advancement opportunities and salary increases. Such perceptions suggest compelling reasons why these policies tend to be underutilized by men, single workers and career-oriented mothers (Bailyn, Fletcher and Kolb, 1997; Whitehouse and Zetlin, 1999).

Another major limitation of work-family policies is that, although ostensibly gender neutral, these policies in practice revolve around facilitating the working conditions of women (Strachan and Burgess, 1998). The high numbers of women compared to men, utilizing family-friendly arrangements has not served women well because it leads to women being seen as needing help and as being the beneficiaries of “special treatment” (Doherty, 2004; Liff and Cameron 1997), without fundamentally altering men’s and women’s roles in society. Viewing work-family policies as ‘women’s issues’ can also jeopardize women’s attempts to earn high incomes or move into jobs commensurate with their interests and abilities (Haas, Hwang and Russell, 2000).

Charlesworth (1997) cites an example of the gendered nature of family-friendly policy provision in a study of flexible working hours. Based on six case studies examining processes of enterprise bargaining since the *Workplace Relations Act 1996*, she argues that the flexibility realized in many enterprise agreements in female-dominated industries, has been solely employer-driven. Changes that potentially disadvantage female employees include: increases in the spread of hours over which ordinary time is worked (thereby limiting access to penalty rates); a ‘freeing up’ of part-time work conditions with decreased minimum hours; decreases in casual and penalty loadings; and changes to start and finish times (Charlesworth, 1997). Further, Doherty (2004) argues that voluntary approaches to work-life balance are contingent, especially in industries with low rates of unionization, and may only deliver positive benefits to women when the labour market is tight. These examples indicate that many work-family measures are tenuous and can be introduced for reasons other than family-friendliness, subsequently constraining, rather than enhancing, the ability to balance work and care commitments (Whitehouse and Zetlin, 1999). Thus, the basis for the introduction of work-family policies and their assumed and stated objectives, such as equity, work-life



balance or cost reduction, are likely to influence the day-to-day experiences of employees who use the policies.

### *Lack of Policy Evaluation*

Although the limitations described are becoming more widely recognized in the academic literature, there is a paucity of research conducted in organizations which investigates whether intentions stated in work-family policy documentation actually result in improved work-family outcomes for employees. However, Wise and Bond (2003) examined how four financial services organizations approached the work-life balance agenda and found that workloads and business deliverables were often incompatible with formal work-life policies. Further, a limited number of comprehensive evaluations of the impacts of work-family policy on a company's 'bottom line' have also been undertaken (see Ministerial Task Force on Work and Family, 2002 for a review), but they are far from commonplace and research examining the impact on organizational culture or individual employees is even less frequent (Glass and Finley, 2002; Mattis, 1990). The lack of evaluation of work-family programs may be related to difficulties conceptualizing relevant 'costs' and 'benefits' (Dex and Smith, 2002; Glass and Finley, 2002), especially the synergy between financial outcomes and quality of life outcomes (Lewis, 1996) and/or difficulties discerning the trade-offs for individual policies (Mattis, 1990). They are nonetheless an important component of effectively managing the human resources in any organization.

### *Work-family Policy in Australian Universities*

Universities were among the first institutions to implement equal employment opportunities and affirmative action legislation in Australia. They are also widely perceived as having in place strategies and structures to encourage the participation of women and other minorities in senior management, organizational development and educational programs (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1996). Universities' aims with regard to removing barriers for employees with family responsibilities are also enshrined in human resource policies such as reduced and flexible hours arrangements, employer-provided childcare and paid maternity leave. The primary factors influencing the development and implementation of these policies therefore, are likely to be the promotion of equity and work-life balance, as opposed to attempts at cost-reduction. The history of this policy development and the extent of documentation of work-family policies mean that Universities are ideally placed to formally examine how policies are translating into practice.

Despite the good intentions of equity strategies and family-friendly work policies, the success of these policies in providing women equal career opportunities in tertiary sector workplaces, is questionable. For example, women are still heavily under-represented at senior levels in Australian Universities. Although approximately half of all tertiary employees are female and nearly three-quarters of these work full-time, women constitute only 16.1 percent of senior academic positions (Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, (DETYA), 2001) and 29.4 percent of senior professional (non-academic) staff positions (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1996). Further, when tenure rates and employment levels are compared for men and women in the same age groups and with the same length of service, men are more likely to hold senior and tenured positions (Allen and Castleman, 1995). Thus, despite a strong commitment to equity initiatives in comparison to other public and private sector organizations, women's progress across the tertiary education

sector has been less than optimal and suggests a lack of concurrence between policy and practice.

### *The Current Study*

Despite several substantiated benefits of work-family policy provision, identified limitations such as low uptake rates, gendered perceptions of policy usage and restricted career progression for women, suggest that some of the aims of organizational policies, even in relatively progressive organizations such as Universities, may not filter down to what employees experience in practice. However, such discrepancies are rarely quantified or addressed. Thus, this research explores the extent to which work-family policy aims are being achieved at the level of individual employees. The results are expected to highlight the need for organizations to examine how their policies translate into practice. Hence, findings will permit the development of organization-specific recommendations that facilitate the consistent implementation of policies designed to facilitate work-family balance.

### *Methods*

This study was carried out with the knowledge and support of the University, but was not commissioned by it. The interview data reported are part of a larger study exploring salient issues affecting maternal LFP, including financial, domestic, childcare and public and organizational policy issues. The document analysis was conducted for this study exclusively.

### *Participants*

Participants for this study were a group of working mothers employed in a large Australian university. The 20 women were a sub-sample of questionnaire respondents from a study examining the factors influencing maternal labor force participation. In contrast to the larger sample of questionnaire respondents who were working women responsible for dependent children up to the age of 24, participants of interest for this study cared for at least one child under school age (defined as four years of age or under). The rationale for choosing women with children in this under-school age group is that decisions regarding paid work and parental demands are greatest at this point in time (Greenstein, 1986). A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select respondents from the original pool of 112 questionnaire respondents who indicated a willingness to be interviewed, whereby the variability in types of experiences that were thought to be most relevant to the topic were maximized. Participants were chosen to represent as wide a cross-section of occupational, work hours and salary categories as possible and the final sample consisted of six lecturers from five faculties (two at level A, three at level B, one at Level C), one clinic administrator, four administration officers from three faculties, one tutor, one research assistant, one photographer, one psychologist, two data analysis officers, two librarians and one laboratory technician. The interviewees were responsible for between one and four children, from the ages of eight months to 12 years with at least one child being four years of age or under. They were employed to work between 7.5 and 37 hours per week (11 full-time and 9 part-time) and all part-time staff were employed in a professional / non-academic capacity and without supervisory responsibilities. All but one interviewee, who was a sole parent, were married and living with a male partner.

### *Procedure*

The research was carried out in three distinct phases. In Phase One, documentary analysis was conducted in order to establish stated policy aims from which interview data could be compared.

During Phase Two, five pilot interviews (with participants similar to the true interview pool, that is, white collar service sector employees with high levels of formal education) were initially carried out and transcribed so that the adequacy of the overall organization and wording of questions could be assessed (however, they were not included in the analysis). Twenty study interviews were then conducted, transcribed and analyzed. All interviews were carried out by the researcher to ensure consistency in approach and interpretation. All participants were asked the same questions, although they were not necessarily covered in the same order. Paraphrasing and claim checking were used extensively to demonstrate the data was being interpreted as intended.

In Phase Three of the research, the documented aims in formal organizational work-family policies were directly compared with interview data in order to establish the extent to which these aims were being achieved.

### *Instruments*

*Documentary Data.* Documents for this study were derived from relevant hard copy and internet-based texts and manuscripts that were available in the public domain and which contained information regarding the University's work-family policies. These documents were developed by the Department of Human Resources, the Department of Planning and Resources and the University's Equity Section and consisted of (a) the University's Manual of Policies and Procedures (MOPP); (b) Equity Section policies and reports; (c) Enterprise

Bargaining Agreements (collective, formal workplace agreements); (d) the University Work and Family guide (1997) and (e) the University Equity Plan, 2003-2007.

*Interview Data.* Questions were developed from previous research identifying factors found to influence maternal LFP (e.g., childcare costs, financial factors, career salience, attitudes towards non-maternal care) and were designed to elicit a narrative-style of response. Responses that reflected the experiences of organizational work-family policy are reported. A semi-structured interview was utilized to balance the requirements of consistency across interviews with flexibility of responses.

### *Analysis*

*Documentary Data:* Using a conceptual content analysis approach, words, phrases or sentences were considered to be ‘aims’ if they represented “a clearly directed intent or purpose” (Oxford Australian Dictionary, 1998) or if they reflected underlying ideals or principles that guided the enactment of specific work-family policies identified a priori. These policies were: flexible hours ; part-time and job-share arrangements; formal work at home arrangement and paid maternity leave. Several recent studies (e.g., Chatman and Jehn, 1994; Kabanoff and Daly, 2002) have used a content analysis methodology to compare organizational documents with organizational practices. Coding was undertaken for the existence of a concept, rather than the frequency, because a sentence which described an aim of work-family policy was considered as important as a single word mentioned several times.

*Interview Data:* Interview transcripts were analyzed using a relational content analysis approach where the text was manifestly coded by identifying words and phrases that

constituted discrete variables associated with employees' experiences of work-family policies. Major categories (e.g., part-time work, flexible work arrangements) were pre-determined and codes were applied if women referred directly to these categories. This approach allowed a picture to be built up of the types of policy issues that were salient for this sample of women and allowed for their experiences to be directly compared with policy aims evident in organizational documents. Consistent with the content analysis approach, frequencies or 'counts' of occurrences of a particular theme are reported where it was important to verify the consistency of a reported phenomenon (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

### *Results*

#### *Phase One: Aims of Formal Work-family Policies*

On examination, a number of aims were evident in organizational documents in terms of what the work-family policies should achieve. These policy aims are detailed in Table 1.

[Take in Table i here]

These aims of work-family policy are inclusive and pro-active in their approach and promote treating employees, whatever their backgrounds and positions, as worthwhile, critical components of a successful organization. They also indicate the organisation takes a broad life-cycle approach to career development and workplace relations, irrespective of the presence or absence of children. However, the specific references to employees with family responsibilities suggest these employees may not be able to conform to a traditional model of

worker who is always available to the workplace without potential constraints such as family commitments. The identified aims also challenge some of the stereotypes about workers with family responsibilities such as perceptions of reduced commitment to their work and greater satisfaction with positions at lower levels of seniority. These data, which identify work-family policy intentions, provide the basis upon which employees' experiences can be contrasted.

*Phase Two: Reported Experiences of Organizational Work-family Policy*

Although there is a wide range of work-family policies available in the organization, results demonstrated that the nature of part-time appointments and flexible hours arrangements were by far the most salient policies for this group of women and are therefore the focus of these reported results.

*Flexible Hours Arrangements.* Flexibility in hours worked was reported by full-time women as being a crucial factor in ameliorating the negative effects of combining work and family commitments. The majority of full-time interview respondents were utilising some form of flexible work arrangements and indicated that being able to vary their hours on a daily and weekly basis was a considerable benefit of their employment. This flexibility extended to some full-time women being only physically present in the workplace between two and four days per week. Specific aspects of job flexibility reported by this sample were being able to be physically at the workplace a lesser number of days, to vary start and finish times and the ability to work from home. The following example typifies these aspects of flexibility:



(Carol – part-time): “I sometimes don’t come in till 9.30 or if my child is sick or can I have this week off in the school holidays, or can I change my days because I want to go on an excursion on Friday, I really don’t have a problem. I think that’s individual management as well. They respect that I am going to do the work whether I’m there on Wednesday or on Friday and that I’m going to get it done and I’m going to do a good job of it.”

Indeed, several full-time women stated that they would not be willing to continue in full-time work without this flexibility. For example:

(Libby – full-time): “I know that some women have to be at work all the time. I couldn't do that, then I would have to go to three days [reduce hours to part-time]. That’s what keeps me here you know”.

Although participation in flexible hours arrangements was reported by most full-time interviewees, the degree of flexibility was far greater for academic/faculty, than professional/non-academic staff. Two of the four full-time professional staff reported less than optimal flexibility in their jobs. For example:

(Angela – full-time): “I wonder if my life will be different when she is five or six and she might need me more to be going into the school - picking up at 3 - there is no way I can do that in a job that I do now and taking her to swimming and things like that”.

The nature of flexible work arrangements reported in these interviews also benefited the organization in meeting its obligations of variable work demands at different times of the

year. That is, several women reported working longer hours at various peak times during the year, and shorter hours between semesters. For example:

(Emily – full-time): Throughout the semester (...) the sheer preparation and marking is phenomenal, however, then you've got your downtime between semesters where, sure, you are still doing preparation [and] research, but that is all at a lovely rate”.

In summary, the work-family policy ‘flexible hours arrangements’, appeared to be available to most employees in this sample, although the extent of this flexibility was greater for academic than professional staff. Flexibility in working hours was highly valued in terms of its contribution to managing the multiple roles of employee and carer to young children. This arrangement also appeared to meet the needs of the organization in terms of workloads which varied throughout the year.

*Part-time / Job Sharing Arrangements.* Part-time and job-sharing are reported together in the following section for two reasons. Firstly, both modes of work mean being employed for less than full-time hours, with the same employment conditions. Secondly, the reported advantages and disadvantages of these arrangements were not distinguishable from each other in these results. That is, although the two women who were job-sharing mentioned their co-worker in passing, they reported themselves as working “part-time” and did not consider themselves particularly differently from other part-time employers.

Part-time working women were very satisfied with their LFP, compared to full-time working women. They were adamant that spending some days of the week at work and some at home gave them a healthy balance between employment and family life that they felt full-time women did not have. Despite this overall satisfaction with the number of hours worked,

part-time working women also reported several disadvantages to being employed for less than full-time hours. These disadvantages included the decreased availability of opportunities for advancement and secondments within the organization, being considered less of a team member by co-workers, and having a de-valued status. They also perceived that managers and colleagues considered them less committed and motivated because they were employed part-time. For example:

(Prue – part-time): “There’s a position at the moment that’s an executive position and I’ve been here for quite a while and that position could have been mine, but it is only a full-time position and I can’t do that. (...) I can easily go and say that I want it and I know I would have a good chance of getting it but I would have to work full-time and I don’t want to do that because I like the balance at the moment. So I do think that I do have to put things on hold until I’m ready to go back full-time and I won’t be ready for a while.”

As this quote suggests, the opportunities for increased seniority were reported as only being available on a full-time basis. Full-time working women were also acutely aware of the trade-offs inherent in part-time work. Some had experienced these trade-offs first-hand, having worked part-time at some point since returning from the birth of one or more of their children.

(Lorraine – full-time): “People still have a problem with you working part-time. You want to go for a promotion or go somewhere, they don’t say, ‘gee, you were good to maintain part-time work through your child-bearing and rearing years’. They just say ‘Oh, you’re just here part-time.’ The assumption automatically is I believe that your focus was the family, so

therefore you've got something wrong with you, you've got problems and you're doing this for a bit of pin money and those sort of things".

*Phase Three: Comparisons of Policy Aims and Employees' Experiences*

The most salient policies for these interviewees were flexible work arrangements and part-time work. To some extent, these policies were experienced by employees as intended. Several aims related to successfully juggling work and family, such as 'help people balance their lives as well as meet the needs of the organization' and 'integrate public and private spheres of our lives', were consistent with the reported experiences of most women in the sample utilising flexible work arrangements. That is, their ability to adjust their start and finish times, work different days of the week when necessary and take time off during the day to attend to family needs, were akin to the 'balance' and 'integration' statements in work-family documentation. This flexibility was greater for academic than professional staff however. Positive experiences of having control over when and where work was performed, were also consistent with the aims 'developing new attitudes about time and how it should be used and controlled' and 'create a climate of trust'.

The widespread availability of part-time work and the high degree of satisfaction expressed by employees working part-time hours, were consistent with the policy aim 'improving morale and productivity'. However, both part-time and full-time women perceived substantial disadvantages of part-time arrangements in terms of constrained career progression. Clearly, the negative consequences (whether real or imagined) of participating in part-time or job shared positions were not consistent with several intended provisions and aims of the University's work-family policies. These include 'allow access to part-time / fractional positions at all levels of the career structure, including supervisory positions' and

‘remove barriers for staff with family responsibilities’. This gap is concerning for the promotion of equity between employees with and without family responsibilities.

### *Discussion*

This study explored the extent to which documented aims of formal, work-family policies were being achieved, based on the experiences of a group of female employees with dependent children. The results suggest that while many reported experiences are positive and consistent with policy intentions, there is room for improvement in other areas. The research also allows for the identification of strategies which promote a closer alignment between what is formally intended and what occurs in practice.

#### *Experiences of Flexible Hours Arrangements Consistent with Several Policy Aims*

The findings suggest that the reported experiences of flexible work arrangements are consistent with several policy aims. Women’s experiences of utilising flexible work policies was largely consistent with rhetorical notions of flexibility being ‘good’ for employees as well as the aims identified in organisational documentation such as ‘achieve a greater balance’, ‘create a climate of trust’ and ‘integrate public and private spheres’.

The availability and extent of flexible hours arrangements were consistent across part-time/full-time status, although it varied by employment type, with teaching/academic staff reporting greater flexibility in their jobs than professional/non-academic staff. This difference was largely due to the type of work performed. For example, although professional staff could usually vary their start and finish times, they were more likely to be required to be physically present in the workplace during certain ‘core’ times of the day. Academic staff on the other hand, were less constrained because they were able to conduct a considerable

amount of their work (e.g., marking, research, preparing lectures) from home. Although there is no formal policy related to working from home in this organization and it is not specifically outlined in Enterprise Bargaining Agreements (collective workplace agreements), 'flexiplace working' or telecommuting, is fairly widespread and occurs on both an ad hoc and regular basis (Work and Family Guide, 1997). This situation would suggest that enterprise bargaining or formal industrial processes are not the only vehicle for the implementation of family-friendly measures in the workplace (Ministerial Task Force on Work and Family, 2002), but that informal arrangements are also working well in some situations. The distinctions between different categories of staff having access to varying levels of flexibility are likely to be apparent in many other industries and organizations where the nature of the work performed either facilitates or constrains the extent of flexibility stated in organizational policy. For example, a Danish study revealed that while only one quarter of civil service employees interviewed had formal flexi-time arrangements, no less than one-third of the remainder had informal flexibility by which they were able to vary their daily working hours in accordance with their personal needs (Holt and Thaulow, 1996).

The working mothers in this sample benefited from flexible hours arrangements in several ways. Firstly, they were able to have control over the time they spent physically in the workplace, thereby reducing the need for paid care-giving to their children. This benefit had both financial advantages in terms of reduced childcare costs and emotional benefits in terms of being able to spend more time with their children. This finding may be important for organizations to consider when developing policies aiming to retain women with dependent children in full-time positions. That is, women with young children may be more willing to work full-time if they can be physically present in the workplace less than five days per week, while fulfilling their employment responsibilities via compressed work weeks and/or telecommuting. Secondly, being able to vary their start and finish times and days of the week

reduced the strain of morning routines and allowed for better coordination with partner's varying work schedules. Thirdly, being able to take time off during the day allowed these women to attend their children's significant activities.

These results suggest that flexible working hours are also likely to be benefiting the organization in terms of keeping up with a workload that is inherently variable throughout the year. This assumption is based on the principle of reciprocity in working extra hours during peak times that was an accepted part of the flexible employment arrangements for these women.

The importance attributed to flexibility and the sheer volume of anecdotes cited in these narratives, attests to the value these women placed on being able to carry out their employment duties in this way. Indeed, several full-time women stated that without this policy, they would not continue to work full-time and it is therefore likely that, consistent with previous research, flexible arrangements are also improving retention and decreasing turnover (Dex and Scheibl, 2001, National Council of Jewish Women, 1993). The trade-offs for utilising flexible arrangements, such as the spillover of work into family life, was considered negligible compared to the control and autonomy flexible hours arrangements provided.

### *Experiences of Part-time Employment Inconsistent with Several Policy Aims*

Part-time work is the most widely utilized work arrangement used by female workers providing family care (for a child, the elderly or the disabled) whereas paid leave is the main work arrangement used by males providing family care (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2000). The generally high satisfaction with part-time work arrangements found in this data, in terms of allowing mothers with young children to manage both employment and family commitments, is consistent with several documented aims of work-family policy. These aims

include “integrating public and private spheres”, “achieving a greater balance”, “improving morale and productivity” and “developing new attitudes about time and how it should be used and controlled”.

Despite being a widely used and apparently satisfying form of employment, part-time women in this sample perceived that their less than full-time hours limited their opportunities for promotion or advancement. If these perceptions of decreased opportunities are accurate, it is likely that decreased promotion opportunities partly arise because of the assumption that time spent in the workplace is an indication of commitment and productivity (University Work and Family Guide, 1997) and partly because of perceptions that more senior positions require a full-time presence in the workplace. Despite this perceived disadvantage however, part-time women (who were all employed in a professional / non-academic capacity and without supervisory responsibilities) were not prepared to compromise their family lives in order to work full-time. Instead, they accepted that they were only able to maintain, rather than improve their status on the career ladder, until their children were older and required a less intense level of care. Part-time employees in this sample were also very much aware that part-time work was preferable to dropping out of the workforce altogether. That is, part-time women perceived that although they were unlikely to be able to develop their careers while working less than full-time hours, they were preventing the deterioration of their job-related skills and minimizing their earning losses (McRae, 1993) by maintaining some contact with paid employment.

The views of most full-time women in this sample concurred with those expressed by part-time women regarding reduced career opportunities and indicated that it was one of the major reasons they continued to work full-time. In other words, the full-time mothers in this sample recognized the differential opportunities that existed for part-time employees and did



not want to be relegated to this group of disadvantaged workers with few opportunities for advancement.

The finding that part-time employees perceive limited access to promotion and career paths within organizations is not unique. A number of previous studies have revealed that working part-time in many industries and occupations is incompatible with promotion, with being taken seriously and with access to a range of higher status male-dominated occupations (Kirby and Krone, 2002; Probert, 1996). There is also strong evidence that other family-friendly work arrangements are under-utilized in many organizations (Allen and Russell, 1999; Dex and Smith, 2002). However, what this data reveals is that women's experiences of part-time work are clearly inconsistent with explicitly stated policy aims such as "allow access to part-time / fractional positions at all levels of the career structure, including supervisory positions" and "remove barriers for staff with family responsibilities". Unlike flexible hours arrangements, the specific purpose of part-time / job sharing policies is also unstated in Enterprise Bargaining Agreements, except to say "Subject to this clause, all other provisions of this Agreement relevant to full-time staff members apply to part-time staff members" (Enterprise Bargaining Agreements 2000-2003, Clauses 48 and 51). Thus, equal opportunity for part-time compared to full-time employees is implied rather than specifically stated in organizational policy and the differential opportunities that actually exist are not formally addressed. Given that the vast majority of part-time employees are women, the problem of career progression is also highly gendered. Although human resource staff in many large organizations, especially those with similarly responsive work-family policies as the University investigated for this study, would have some awareness of the career difficulties faced by their part-time staff, systematically identifying obvious conflicts between documented policy and what happens in practice may prompt specific strategies to address this widespread problem.

The gap between a number of policy aims and employees' experiences of part-time / reduced hours arrangements found in this research, as well as previous work suggesting part-time employees are disadvantaged in the workplace (e.g., Junor, 1998; Kirby and Krone, 2002; Tam, 1997), suggests the need for a proactive approach to this problem. Further research which examines senior positions where part-time or job-sharing options have been utilized, and the challenges and successes of such arrangements, would be a useful first step in addressing differential promotion opportunities for full-time and part-time workers.

Supporting career advancement for employees working reduced hours arrangements would also require changes to recruitment strategies, such as making these possibilities clear in position descriptions and job advertisements. For example, only 85 of some 2 500 (3.4 percent) positions advertised by the organization in this study between 1997 and 2002, were publicized as being available on a part-time basis. Targets could also be set in relation to the number of part-time senior positions within the University, as they are for gender equity.

Further, more expansive reference to work-family policies in formal collective workplace agreements might promote the use of these policies as legitimate and mainstream. Finally, education and practical assistance for managers and supervisors that promotes a change of organizational culture equating part-time status with low levels of seniority and responsibility, may also be useful. The implementation of these strategies which promote consistency between the aims of formal policy and what occurs in practice, will assist employees with caring responsibilities to more effectively manage their work and family lives without undue career constraints.

### *Limitations and Conclusions*

Several aspects of the study may limit the generalizability of these results. The findings must be interpreted in light of the specific nature of the organization used for the research which was located in the tertiary education sector in Australia. There are likely to be differences for example, in the types of organizational policy documents available and the wording contained therein, compared to other organizations, industries and sectors. However, Universities are not entirely unique in terms of their policies and employment practices either. For example, there are many similarities between the work-family policy provisions of the tertiary sector and both State and Commonwealth public sector organizations in Australia. The fact that approximately half the interview sample consisted of academic/faculty staff, also means that this particular sample probably experienced a greater degree of flexibility in their day-to-day work than many workers employed in other organizations and would therefore have been more likely to state very positive views about this particular policy. In some other organizations where flexibility results in greater benefits for the employer than the employee (Charlesworth, 1997), experiences of flexible work practices may not be reported so affirmatively. Finally, this study investigated the experiences of working mothers specifically. Although they are certainly the largest group of employees to utilize work-family arrangements, they may experience using these policies differently to other groups, such as those with elder care responsibilities or older workers phasing into retirement.

In summary, this study suggests that the aims of organizational work-family policies may or may not be consistent with the experiences of employees' who use these policies, even in organizations where the availability of family-friendly arrangements are relatively generous. Although experiences of flexibility in the organization were largely consistent with policy aims, the nexus between formal policy and experience in relation to part-time work may be problematic, especially as it relates to career opportunities, level of involvement in all aspects of work life and perceptions of employee commitment. The results inform the current

understanding of how work-family arrangements are experienced, and encourages human resource professionals to examine how this increasingly important area of policy translates into practice.

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Table i.

*Aims of Work-family Policies.*

<i>Aims</i>
Respond to changing economic, industrial, legislative and social forces
Recognize that staff and students are likely to have diverse and demanding family responsibilities
Help people balance their lives as well as meet the needs of the organization
Allow staff and students access to the same educational and employment opportunities, whether or not they
Create a climate of trust
Develop new attitudes about time and how it should be used and controlled
Value diversity
Value people
Allow access to part-time / fractional positions at all levels of the career structure, including supervisory positions
Humanize the workplace
Recognize that time spent in the workplace is not necessarily an indication of commitment and productivity
Integrate public and private spheres of our lives
Help staff on parental leave to keep in touch with their professional area
Improve morale and productivity
Remove barriers for staff with family responsibilities

